Voices from the NWP Teacher Exchange Program

by Pat Fox, with Donna Vincent and Lynn Welsch

When I arrived in Las Vegas that July morning, a woman with short hair and a flowing leopard-print skirt approached me. “Are you Jennifer?” she asked in a British accent. I was so glad that my idea of wearing a Michigan shirt worked. With a quick hug and an “I-just-thought-you-looked-like-a-writing-project-fellow,” we escaped the airport as retiree-gamblers continued to claim their luggage.

—Jennifer Conrad, on meeting host site director Rosemary Holmes-Gull on the first day of her teacher exchange to the Southern Nevada Writing Project

And so it begins: another intrepid writing project teacher-consultant off on a National Writing Project Teacher Exchange Program (TEX) adventure. In 2002, trusting in the power of the writing project model and the wisdom and generosity of NWP colleagues across the country, Jennifer Conrad and 16 other teacher-consultants representing 14 sites in 7 states traveled within their own states or across the country in a variety of exchanges supported by TEX.

Since 1995, over 50 teachers from more than 40 local NWP sites have participated in teacher exchanges—cross-site visits that enrich participants’ understanding of the NWP model and the work of individual sites. Encouraged by their directors, these experienced writing project teacher-consultants come to their exchanges looking to extend their own professional frontiers. In the process of participating in TEX, they find they develop a broader perspective of NWP work as well as their leadership skills—both assets that they bring back to the benefit of their home sites.

A Variety of Exchanges

In addition to two-week summer institute exchanges among teacher-consultants from the Gateway Writing Project (Missouri), the Southern Nevada Writing Project, and the Third Coast Writing Project (Michigan), TEX supported the following in 2002:

- in-state exchanges among three NWP sites in Georgia and among five sites in Oregon
- a special-focus technology exchange in the first week of an online institute in Alaska
- a special-focus exchange targeting the NWP Project Outreach Network goal of increasing diversity.

Below, you’ll hear some of the voices of 2002 TEX teacher-consultants and their home and host site directors as they reflect on their experiences and consider what they learned.

Invitational Summer Institute Exchanges

For sites interested in sending a teacher-consultant to another NWP site and hosting a visiting teacher-consultant for a two-week experience, invitational summer institute exchanges affirm the power of the NWP model and enrich our sense of its possibilities.

It comes as no surprise when TEX teacher-consultants confirm that writing is at the heart of every summer invitational institute. Describing the first day of her visit to the Southern Nevada Writing Project, Jennifer Conrad recalled, “I still felt like a stranger because everyone else had met once before during the preinstitute meeting. But we quickly introduced ourselves through personal artifacts and got to writing. From that point on, I felt at home. I was in a room full of fellow writers and teachers of writing.”

Gateway teacher-consultant Sioux Roslawski, inspired by her host site’s emphasis on published, explained, “Like all sites, Third Coast publishes an anthology, but they raise the bar by expecting that each participant will send off a piece (or two) to a journal, a magazine, the NWP E-Anthology, or an NWP publication. To support the process, we shared examples of query letters, discussed prospective publishers, and, as the pieces were sent off, we celebrated.”

When Sioux returned home with specific program ideas and a commitment “to continue

the momentum through greater involvement,” she found that her own enthusiasm was matched by the enthusiasm of her home site director, Diane Scollay, who insisted that, “Because of her experience in Michigan, I’m confident that Sioux will become a catalyst for change and take on a greater leadership role in the Gateway Writing Project.”

Exchange teacher-consultants receive an honorarium as presenters, and because they arrive experienced in NWP’s teachers-teaching-teachers model, they instinctively take on mentoring and leadership roles at their host sites. Lynn Welsch said of her exchange visit to St. Louis, “I loved my role as a participant in the Gateway Writing Project Summer Institute. Because I had already been in a summer institute, I was able to reassure my colleagues that the uncertainty, the ‘messiness,’ was a healthy part of the process of discovery, and accepting that was part of what we all ask our students go through. It’s important that the conversations in the summer institute encourage teachers to try new things and trust in the process to reach curriculum goals.” Lynn’s exchange experience helped her to focus on the kind of role she wants to play as a teacher-leader at her home site: “I found that I really enjoyed my role as an advisor/encourager during the summer institute. I think I would also enjoy mentoring new teacher-consultants as they work during their first school year after going through the institute.”

In-State and Regional Mini-Exchanges

For sites interested in exchanging teacher-consultants—whether in-state or regionally—during a summer invitational institute or other exemplary program, these one- to four-day exchanges strengthen relationships between and among sites.

In 2002, in a new twist on the model of two-week cross-state exchanges, TEX supported in-state mini-exchanges involving 10 teachers from 8 sites in Georgia and Oregon. Adam Hathaway, co-director of the South Georgia Writing Project, along with Alisa Daniel, co-director of the Georgia Southern Writing Project, spearheaded the exchange among Georgia’s writing project sites. “I started thinking about the teacher exchange about three years ago as part of our plan to strengthen the state network,” Adam recalled. “Cross-site exchanges offer teacher-consultants an exciting
opportunity to stay active in the workings of their sites. Exchanges are a great way to share ideas between sites and create a support structure among sister sites."

South Georgia's site director, Chere Peguesse, shared her co-director's enthusiasm: "Anita Lank and Pat McCall wrote with us, participated in our writing groups, and presented their demonstrations, which were creative and practical. I learned about how Georgia Southern runs their closing ceremony and how they schedule their days. I was also relieved to hear that other sites experience the same recruiting challenges that we do."

Specific Program/Special-Focus Exchanges

For sites interested in sending a teacher-consultant to another NWP site and/or hosting a teacher-consultant from another site, usually for one to four days, these exchanges support one or more of the following purposes:

- strengthening ongoing collaborations related to memberships in and affiliations with specific NWP programs and national networks (e.g., Project Outreach, Rural Sites Network, Urban Sites Network, English Language Learners Network, Teacher Inquiry Communities Network, and Technology Liaison Project).
- learning from and/or teaching leaders at another site about a specific part of NWP site work (e.g., service programs) or about particular site programs of interest (e.g., advanced institutes, writing marathons, digital storytelling, young writers programs).

In addition to cross-country summer institute exchanges and in-state mini-exchanges, TEX sponsored two special-focus exchanges in 2002. In the first of these, NWP Program Associate Christina Cantrill, who works on network-wide technology issues, visited the Alaska State Writing Consortium (ASWC) for the first week of their three-week online institute. The Alaska site developed an open institute model that calls upon technology to address the challenges of short summers and travel over long distances. Alaska's online institute is, according to Christina, "at its core, about writing and teaching practices. It just happens to be online. So often the technology comes first and the writing and learning become seemingly secondary. I think that the framework for this course—the integration of different kinds of writing, teaching, and technology experiences—will be very important to share with others."

In another special-focus exchange, Sylvia Bailey and Bessie Burden, teacher-consultants and Project Outreach Network (PON) team members from the Oakland Writing Project in Michigan, visited the Philadelphia Writing Project. Having learned through their conversations with Philadelphia's PON team of the project's focus on "issues of access, relevance, and diversity," a focus shared by Oakland, Sylvia explained, the purpose of their visit was "to observe the summer institute and consider ideas that we might adapt at our site."

The visiting teacher-consultants found a wealth of inspiration during their exchange—from the diversity of the participants and the facilitators to the strong focus on social justice. "Our exchange visit to Philadelphia has been a catalyst for change at our site," Sylvia reported.

Ongoing Cross-Site Inquiry, or the Trip That Keeps on Giving

Because we know that lasting change happens when professional conversations are sustained over time, TEX encourages teacher-consultants to continue the work begun during their exchanges by offering a limited number of stipends to support ongoing cross-site inquiry.

TEX teacher-consultant Donna Vincent from the Western Kentucky University Writing Project collaborated with Georgia colleague Alisa Daniel to develop early elementary curricula in response to similar state-mandated testing programs. TEX participants Suzanne Linebarger, co-director of the Northern California Writing Project, and Pete Pazzino, a teacher-consultant with the Northern Virginia Writing Project, collaborated over the course of three years following their exchanges to share program models and develop opportunities for teachers at their sites to publish their professional writing.

As Lynn Welsh recalled, her collaboration with teacher-consultants at the Gateway Writing Project grew out of earlier work begun at her home site: "Sense of Place," the presentation I gave in St. Louis, stemmed from my work on our Rural Voices, Country Schools team. We had focused on thinking about the importance of place—urban or rural. I found that the Gateway teachers enjoyed hearing about the problems in a rural school, and I was intrigued by the similarities between the challenges that we each faced at our very different sites. I want to continue to work with teachers at Gateway to compare the impact of issues of poverty and diversity in rural and urban settings."

And Jennifer Conrad explained how hearing about the Southern Nevada Writing Project's writing fair sparked her interest in developing a similar program back in Michigan. "Students meet for one day and go through the writing process on one piece. They begin with breakfast and a presentation by a local writer. Then they draft, respond, eat lunch, and revise. At the end of the day, they have a finished piece that they have 'published' in a sharing session. As Rosemary Holmes-Gull, SNWP's site director, talked about it, I drifted away, imagining what a Third Coast writing fair might look like, wondering how I could take charge and start one." Continuing cross-site conversations with colleagues in Nevada, Jennifer is doing just that.

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After two weeks in "Sin City," I was homesick—for the institute that I was about to leave. How could I abandon my new friends before most of them had given their presentations? How was I going to make it through the day without writing and giggling with my response group? How was Vicki's pool party going to turn out? Theresa's motorcycle accident piece? Ben's frustration over a lost friendship? Arlene's name piece? Connie's solitary woman making life changes?

But as Rosemary, now dressed in orange capri pants and visor, dropped me off at the airport, I knew what I needed to do. I needed to revise my paper. I needed to keep in touch with my response group and the other fellows at the institute so we could exchange writing and teaching ideas. But most of all, I needed to talk to Ellen Brinkley, my home site director, about all the great new ideas in my head. At the top of my list was, of course, the writing fair.

—Jennifer Conrad, on bidding farewell to host site director Rosemary Holmes-Gull and her colleagues at the Southern Nevada Writing Project.

To explore NWP Teacher Exchange Program opportunities for your site, check the NWP website at http://writingproject.org/Programs/te/index.html or email teacherexchange@writingproject.org.

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